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PERFORMANCE OF AMERICAN POWS  
IN THE VIETNAM WAR:  
ADEQUATE TRAINING OR CREATIVE LEADERSHIP?

by

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## **Abstract**

When looking at the extraordinary circumstances our American prisoners of war faced in North Vietnam, were these men trained in such a way that they knew exactly what to do? Can a training environment adequately duplicate the horrendous conditions these men faced? This research project intends to show that no amount of training could have fully prepared these airmen for the grueling captivity they faced as POWs in North Vietnam, but rather it was their heroism, innovation, imagination, and professional character that cause us to hold them in such high esteem.

First, the research focuses on the protections afforded POWs by the Geneva Convention of 1949 and the training servicemen received immediately prior to and during the Vietnam War regarding the Fighting Man's Code of Conduct and other vital areas of POW camp survival. The research focuses on the roles of religion; communication; ingenuity and imagination; and organization and leadership in understanding exactly what the POWs experienced and if their training prepared them in these areas. Lastly, the research looks at the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War and what recommendations were made at the time to increase the effectiveness of service preparation.

**Introduction.** Perhaps the most enduring symbol of American involvement in the Vietnam War is the POW/MIA flag. It has become a symbol of steadfastness, honor, integrity, and character. Even now, nearly 30 years to the day since the war ended, these heroic men represented by that flag hold a very special place in American military history. When we hear their stories, we often wonder, “What was it really like? Would I be able to endure as they did? What made these men so special?”

We know today that our American military is the best equipped, best trained fighting force the world has ever encountered, but has it always been that way? When looking at the extraordinary circumstances the American POWs faced in North Vietnam, were these men trained in such a way that they knew exactly what to do when they found themselves in these dungeons a half a world away from home? How realistic can training be? How can a training environment adequately duplicate the horrendous conditions these men faced? Do the POWs themselves feel they were prepared?

This research project intends to show that no amount of training could have fully prepared our men for the grueling captivity they faced in North Vietnam, but rather it was their heroism, innovation, imagination, and character that cause us to hold them in such high esteem. These traits cannot be taught directly, but certain levels of training can help develop these characteristics. These characteristics led the POWs to find creative ways to communicate, maintain the chain of command, avoid giving aid and comfort to the enemy, and return with honor. Training may have provided some basic survival skills, but the incredible sacrifice and leadership of our POWs was more significant in allowing them to persevere.

First, the research focuses on the protections afforded POWs by the Geneva

Convention of 1949. After showing how the Convention was put to the test during the Korean War, the research examines steps taken to improve guidance and training for servicemen in the late 1950s and early 1960s, including the inception of the Fighting Man's Code of Conduct and the training plans outlined to implement it. Using this information as background, the research turns towards the specific training our servicemen received immediately prior to and during the Vietnam War. Next, the research examines the roles of religion; communication; ingenuity and imagination; and organization and leadership in understanding exactly what the POWs experienced and if their training prepared them in these areas. Lastly, the research looks at the Vietnam War's immediate aftermath and what recommendations were made to increase the effectiveness of service preparation.

For the purposes of this project, the research is limited to those prisoners of war being held in North Vietnam, most notably at the Hoa Lo Prison, the infamous "Hanoi Hilton." It does not include any information concerning those POWs in South Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia. The research focuses on the captivity of the prisoners (i.e., resistance) and the training received prior to their being taken captive—it does not include analysis of survival, evasion, or escape methods, training, or examples. The focus is primarily aimed at Air Force prisoners of war, though some information is included about POWs from other services.

**The Geneva Convention.** In the aftermath of World War II, the Geneva Convention met in 1949 to consider ways of alleviating victims' suffering during war. The overall goal of the 1949 Convention was to improve the treatment of prisoners of war. The underlying principle was that once a soldier was removed from the fighting

through capture he was no longer a menace to the detaining power and thus should be treated humanely and with respect.<sup>1</sup>

Part II of the 1949 Convention was entitled General Protection of Prisoners of War. Specifically, Article 13 of the Convention prohibited physical torture of prisoners.<sup>2</sup> The first test of the 1949 Conventions was the Korean War. There was plenty of evidence that North Korea was flagrantly violating the conditions set forth in the Convention, including torture and murder of American POWs. Ingley pointed out that when these atrocities were discovered, General Douglas MacArthur warned the North Koreans that they would be held accountable for any future violations. “The atrocities continued, but no one was held accountable...”<sup>3</sup> This lack of forcefulness with which the American government reacted to these violations would perhaps serve to embolden the North Vietnamese in their harsh treatment of POWs over a decade later.

In the Korean War, an unexpected dynamic unfolded: the use of American POWs for North Korea’s political purposes. The Communists considered the prison compound as merely an extension of the battlefield and their treatment of prisoners was just another weapon to be exploited to maximum advantage.<sup>4</sup> Many POWs were caught off guard by the tactics used by the North Korean interrogators and the intense pressure, both physically and mentally, placed on them. This pressure worked. Once “confessions” of crimes had been extracted from American prisoners they were broadcast around the world. “An unfavorable judgment of the performance of the U.S. prisoners became

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<sup>1</sup> Vernon E. Davis, *The Long Road Home: U.S. Prisoners of War Policy and Planning in Southeast Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2000), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949. In E.W. Ingley, “U.S. Prisoners in North Vietnam and the Viability of the Geneva Convention,” (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 1968), 21.

<sup>3</sup> E.W. Ingley, “U.S. Prisoners in North Vietnam and the Viability of the Geneva Convention,” (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 1968), 34.

<sup>4</sup> Davis, *The Long Road Home: U.S. Prisoners of War Policy and Planning in Southeast Asia*, 7.



established in the public consciousness. The impression that there had been a broad failure to exhibit the discipline, courage, and unity that the nation expected of its fighting men hardened into accepted fact and with it a belief that in compiling this record the prisoners had departed widely from the standards of the past.”<sup>5</sup> Here was a group of prisoners, subjected to new propaganda tactics, seemingly unprepared for the hard line interrogations they received.

**Aftermath of the Korean War.** Initially, official assessments in the aftermath of the Korean War all pointed to the conclusion that U.S. servicemen had been unprepared for the indoctrination and interrogation procedures they encountered. Officials quickly realized that service training had to be redirected and extended to cover such contingencies.<sup>6</sup> Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson sought to do a more thorough investigation into the performance of the American POWs in North Korea, to define new policy, and to prescribe new training to deal with any vulnerabilities. In May 1955, Wilson appointed the Defense Advisory Committee on Prisoners of War. In doing so, he informed President Eisenhower the Committee would stress that providing the members of the armed forces with every means possible to oppose physical, mental, and moral persuasion employed by the enemy was a matter of national security.<sup>7</sup> In the Defense Advisory Committee’s charter, dated 17 May 1955, Secretary Wilson directed the creation of a Code of Conduct as well as indoctrination and training guidance in preparation for future conflict.<sup>8</sup>

The Committee’s findings and recommendations were sweeping. While the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. “Committee Documentation of the Secretary of Defense’s Advisory Committee on Prisoners of War,” (Washington, D.C., July 1955), Tab 3.

committee ultimately shed a more favorable light on the POWs' performance in Korea, "members saw a need for new measures of training and indoctrination to prepare U.S. servicemen to perform with greater steadfastness and discipline when in captivity."<sup>9</sup> The report summarized that "training and indoctrination in prisoner of war conduct for the Korean War was inadequate...factors essential to individual resistance, such as moral character, religious faith, belief in cause, and a knowledge of communist fallacies need to be developed prior to military service."<sup>10</sup> This seemed to indicate that surviving a harrowing POW experience required more than just military training. It implied that servicemen were expected to have some of these positive traits before ever entering military service. Prisoners returning from Korea who testified before the Committee pleaded for better, more realistic training.<sup>11</sup> The Committee further directed that "the Armed Forces...institute a training and education program designed to equip members of the Armed Forces better to cope with enemy efforts against them while they are prisoners of war."<sup>12</sup> The Defense Advisory Committee approved a recommended Code of Conduct on 7 Jul 1955, indicating a "need for an explicit code requiring a uniform standard of conduct in the event of future hostilities."<sup>13</sup> The original Code reads as follows:

### **Code of Conduct for Members of the United States Armed Forces**

#### **I**

I am an American fighting man. I serve in the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense.

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<sup>9</sup> Davis, *The Long Road Home: U.S. Prisoners of War Policy and Planning in Southeast Asia*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. "Committee Documentation of the Secretary of Defense's Advisory Committee on Prisoners of War," Tab 4.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., memorandum dated 30 June 1955.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., Tab 4.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., memorandum dated 12 July 1955.

## II

I will never surrender of my own free will. If in command I will never surrender my men while they still have the means to resist.

## III

If I am captured I will continue to resist by all means available. I will make every effort to escape or aid others to escape. I will accept neither parole nor special favors from the enemy.

## IV

If I become a prisoner of war, I will keep faith with my fellow prisoners. I will give no information or take part in any action which might be harmful to my comrades. If I am senior, I will take command. If not, I will obey the lawful orders of those appointed over me and will back them up in every way.

## V

When questioned, should I become a prisoner of war, I am bound to give only name, rank, service number and date of birth. I will evade answering further questions to the utmost of my ability. I will make no oral or written statements disloyal to my country and its allies and harmful to their cause.

## VI

I will never forget that I am an American fighting man, responsible for my actions, and dedicated to the principles which made my country free. I will trust in my God and in the United States of America.<sup>14</sup>

In forwarding the proposed Code of Conduct to the President for approval, Secretary Wilson reiterated that training guidance would be provided to the services.<sup>15</sup> The Committee even went so far as to recommend a series of exploratory conferences with representatives of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare to determine the feasibility of developing more effective pre-service training in the American way of life.<sup>16</sup> As part of the recommendation, the Committee also provided instructional guidance for each article of the Code which was to be posted prominently throughout the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., Tab 4.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., draft SecDef memorandum to President, undated.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., memorandum dated 11 July 1955.

services down to the lowest levels.<sup>17</sup> The Defense Advisory Committee's final report and recommendations were approved by President Eisenhower when he signed Executive Order 10631 on 17 Aug 1955. The Code itself, followed shortly thereafter by the training guidance, was forwarded to each service for implementation.

**POW Training for Vietnam—Adequate?** Leading up to American involvement in Vietnam, the services were split on the interpretation of certain articles of the Code, especially Article V concerning resistance during interrogation. The Air Force, pointing to the Committee's guidance that specialized units be given more targeted training, felt the need to provide its members, especially air crews, with a "second line of resistance," permitting disclosure of information beyond simply "Name, Rank, Service Number and Date of Birth." The Air Force felt it was unrealistic to expect POWs to hold to this strict line of resistance in the face of torture. Navy pilots, attending the USAF Advanced Survival School at Stead AFB, NV, received training on this second line of resistance in direct conflict with the Navy's stricter interpretation of Article V taught in Navy Fleet survival schools. Like the Navy, the Army and Marine Corps took a more hard line view of Article V, holding to a more staunch approach that called for only "Name, Rank, Service Number, Date of Birth." The resulting confusion had an adverse effect on resistance training.<sup>18</sup>

The JCS and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara reviewed the issue, and McNamara considered the point moot, reasoning that there was no way to adequately train a man for the hellish existence a POW would face.<sup>19</sup> The JCS eventually compromised and in July 1964, DoD Directive 1300.7, "Training and Education

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., SecDef memorandum to services, undated.

<sup>18</sup> Davis, *The Long Road Home: U.S. Prisoners of War Policy and Planning in Southeast Asia*, 22-23.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 24.

Measures Necessary to Support the Code of Conduct,” was published, emphasizing uniformity of indoctrination.<sup>20</sup> More specifically, the directive set forth the principle of resistance on the single line of resistance and ruled out the official teaching of second (or successive) lines of resistance, in essence siding with the Army, Navy and Marine Corps position and forcing the Air Force to at least temporarily change its training techniques.<sup>21</sup> The “hard line” policy stayed for several years, but as POWs began returning from captivity the situation was examined. According to Col James L. Lamar, himself a former POW in Vietnam, “a quiet undertone of ‘try to avoid giving any information to your captors’ was evident in Code and [resistance] training, but the official policy remained ‘hard line.’”<sup>22</sup> Ruhl made the case more pointedly: “...harsh tales of brutality and deprivation told by the early returnees from Southeast Asia in the late 1960s caused the Army, Navy, and Marines to reassess their approach to Code training.”<sup>23</sup>

So was the training adequate for Americans before and during the Vietnam War? The Air Force, and indeed all the services, targeted training towards its “high risk” personnel, namely air crews most susceptible to being shot down and being taken captive in North Vietnam. During the Vietnam War, all “high-risk” Air Force personnel were required to attend the survival school located at Stead AFB, NV, later moved to Fairchild AFB, WA.<sup>24</sup> In 1966, area refresher training was established in the Philippines for air crews operating in Southeast Asia, specializing in jungle survival.<sup>25</sup> The Navy had

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>22</sup> Col James L. Lamar, Col Raymond R. Merritt, and Col Robert R. Sawhill, “The Armed Forces Code of Conduct: An Examination of Its Suitability and Application in the Vietnam War and in Future Conflicts,” (Washington DC: Industrial College of the Armed Forces, 1974), 32.

<sup>23</sup> Robert K. Ruhl, “The Code of Conduct,” *Airman*, May 1978, 65.

<sup>24</sup> Lamar, “The Armed Forces Code of Conduct: An Examination of Its Suitability and Application in the Vietnam War and in Future Conflicts,” 36.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

similar training, but many of their aviators attended the Air Force schools as well.

In many specific cases, those who eventually became POWs in North Vietnam were graduates of the U.S. Air Force Academy, which also provided a version of pre-commissioning survival training. For many, their experience at the Air Force Academy in general, and the USAFA survival training in particular, proved to be of some benefit. “The best survival training I got was at the Air Force Academy. It was just going through the fourth class [freshman] system...it taught me personal discipline in terms of doing what I was told to do in the subsequent survival schools.”<sup>26</sup> Edward J. Mechenbier, a POW in Vietnam and a USAFA graduate, also recalled some specific Academy experiences while a prisoner. “Sometimes it was just that ‘I have been here before’ or you make a game out of it in terms of ‘This guy reminds me of an old upperclassman...”<sup>27</sup> Capt Donald R. Spoon agreed. “Part of the thing that kept me going I can trace back to the training that I got here at [USAFA]...I think this desire to be a winner which is instilled in you at the Academy was one of the things that kept me going.”<sup>28</sup> Although he did not experience survival training at USAFA, Col John Fer noted that his Academy training environment was a shock, and that transitioned very well into a POW camp.<sup>29</sup>

What exactly was covered in the Air Force Survival School at Stead and Fairchild AFBs before and during war? Specific instruction techniques remain classified to this day, but according to the 3636<sup>th</sup> Combat Crew Training Group’s Syllabus of Instruction for Survival Training, dated April 1969, students completed a 15-day program designed

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<sup>26</sup> Oral History Interview of Lt Col Edward J. Mechenbier, Typed transcript, 1991, 18.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>28</sup> Oral History Interview of Capt Donald R. Spoon, Typed transcript, 1973, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Oral History Interview of Col John Fer, Typed transcript, 1991, 12.

to learn principles, procedures, equipment and techniques which permitted an individual to survive and return to his organization without giving aid or comfort to the enemy.<sup>30</sup> Pertaining to the POW camp experience in particular, students received 11 hours of classroom instruction on the Code of Conduct, which included an introduction to resistance training; stages of captivity; organizing for resistance; formalized POW organization; exploitation; combating exploitation; Geneva Conventions; and resistance to interrogation.<sup>31</sup> They also received 37 hours of Code of Conduct application training, including a 20-hour isolation and interrogation laboratory and a 12-hour laboratory on group resistance in captivity.<sup>32</sup> The training plan clearly stated the assumption that any potential enemy of the US would not abide by the rules of the Geneva Convention.<sup>33</sup> Of course, by 1969, the U.S. should have been fully aware that the North Vietnamese were willfully violating the letter and intent of the Geneva Convention, so this should have been a predominant factor in all training. Norman summarizes the actual resistance training servicemen received:

“Military men playing the role of guards were allowed to strike prisoners with open, gloved hands...Some men were wired up to old hand-cranked telephones and give electrical shocks to make them sign confessions or collaborate in some other fashion. Training was made as realistic as seemed prudent, given that these were the most highly trained, expensive personnel in all the services.”<sup>34</sup>

In Lamar’s research, a survey of returning POWs after the war found this response:

Colonel D. Dutton, USAF: “I did not go through any survival

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<sup>30</sup> “Syllabus of Instruction for Survival Training,” Air Training Command (U.S. Air Force, 1969), 1.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 21-26.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 26-29.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>34</sup> Geoffrey Norman, *Bouncing Back: How a Heroic Band of POWs Survived Vietnam* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990), 40.

school except the one at Clark AB, where no resistance training or [Code of Conduct training] given. The only ‘formal’ CoC training I received was...1960-63 as part of ground training. What little that was given was hard-line only. Mostly it was just to teach what the CoC actually said—no interpretation. *As you can see, my training was very inadequate.*” (emphasis added)<sup>35</sup>

Lamar’s overall findings showed that the vast majority of POWs were familiar with the Code of Conduct. However, his final conclusion was that training on the Code prior to and during the Vietnam conflict was woefully inadequate and that the training that was provided was mediocre, poorly supervised, and only minimally effective.<sup>36</sup>

In his research, Maj John A. Petelin, Jr., pointed out that in the Korean War most of the prisoners were enlisted men and generally poorly educated. In Vietnam, conversely, the great majority of our POWs were commissioned officers, college graduates, who were more highly selected and very highly trained Air Force and Navy fliers.<sup>37</sup> Petelin’s inference was clear that the educational advantages the Vietnam War POWs had over their Korean War counterparts better prepared them to handle such harsh circumstances, rather than because of some specific POW preparatory training. Ralph Gaither, a POW in Hanoi, noted that most of his fellow prisoners were career minded, had IQ levels of 135 or more, and were by their nature aggressive and somewhat defiant.<sup>38</sup> Their inherent skills as officers and aviators were certainly factors in their performance as POWs. Col Hervey Stockman’s research summarized:

“Military aviators—in particular those dedicated to fighter and attach roles—constitute a true military elite. The Hanoi experience demonstrated that they can be broken and made temporarily submissive,

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<sup>35</sup> Lamar, “The Armed Forces Code of Conduct: An Examination of Its Suitability and Application in the Vietnam War and in Future Conflicts,” 39.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>37</sup> William E. Mayer, “Why American POWs Held Up So Well Under Pressure,” *U.S. News and World Report*, April 1973, 39-41. In Maj John A. Petelin, Jr., “Article V of the Code of Conduct and the Vietnam Experience,” (Maxwell AFB AL: Air Command and Staff College, 1974), 10.

<sup>38</sup> Ralph Gaither, *With God in a POW Camp* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1973), 119.



but it also proved that their aggressiveness and ingenuity would restore their resistance posture and their will to fight. As an elite, they responded quickly and easily to authority and discipline.”<sup>39</sup>

**The Role of Religion.** The personal accounts of American POWs in Vietnam are both inspiring and educational. Many aspects of their experiences simply could not have been directly addressed in a training environment. Religious faith was one such area. Navy Chaplain Alex B. Aronis, who served as a counselor and chaplain during Operation Homecoming, said that most of the prisoners told him they owed their survival and their mental and emotional health to a deep, abiding and growing relationship with God.<sup>40</sup> “If you are a religious person and have a strong belief in God, which I do and did then, then you really fall back on that for strength...I like to tell people that I never really lost hope. I think the religious experience helped that.”<sup>41</sup> In a personal interview with Col (ret) Hank Fowler, who was shot down on Easter Sunday, 26 March 1967, then-1Lt Fowler recalled how he became a born-again Christian on the day of his capture. He had grown up in church but had never placed faith and trust in Jesus Christ until that fateful day when he found himself under his parachute.<sup>42</sup>

Religious faith helped relieve fear and worry for many POWs. Spoon noted that he had come from a religious background but his faith was strengthened shortly after he was shot down. That faith gave him confidence that one day he would be released and would see his parents again, and once that was settled he never worried again.<sup>43</sup> Strong faith also spurred the POWs’ ingenuity. Gaither relied on his Bible memorization:

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<sup>39</sup> Col Hervey S. Stockman, “Authority, Leadership, Organization, and Discipline Among U.S. POWs in the Hanoi Prison System,” (Maxwell AFB AL: Air War College, 1974), 67.

<sup>40</sup> Chaplain Alex B. Aronis, “The Religious Experiences of the POWs,” (Subic Bay Chapel, Naval Station Subic Bay, Republic of the Philippines, 1973), 1.

<sup>41</sup> Oral History Interview of Col John Fer, Typed transcript, 48-49.

<sup>42</sup> Col Hank Fowler, Personal Interview, 8 March 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Oral History Interview of Capt Donald R. Spoon, Typed transcript, 6.

“We passed around to each other every Bible verse any of us could remember. We wrote them down when we could. We wrote them on the floors of our cells with rocks...on that sandpaper-like stuff that passed for toilet paper. Our ink in those early days was made from brick dust or soup, in later days from coffee or whitewash. Sometimes we used our lead toothpaste tubes, which made a pretty good black mark.”<sup>44</sup>

Aronis recounted how the prisoners were permitted to assemble in small groups for worship, how chaplains were appointed, and how several men with choir experience organized singing groups. They practiced regularly, usually twice a week in 30-minute sessions and they would sing special arrangements done by their fellow prisoners.<sup>45</sup> Fowler recalled how the prisoners, many of whom were in solitary confinement, would recite the Lord’s Prayer when one would pound on the wall at the appointed time on Sunday morning, cueing all to say the Prayer softly or silently, but always in unison.<sup>46</sup> Also, whether it was grass soup or rat, Fowler always gave thanks to the Lord by saying grace before eating any meal.<sup>47</sup>

The role of religion was apparently very meaningful even to “non-religious” POWs. “I’m not an overly religious person. In fact, I don’t practice going to church regularly...but I found that...it was very important, very strengthening.”<sup>48</sup> Chaplain Aronis mentioned a comment he received from a return POW, who said, “You know chaplain, I wouldn’t consider myself an unusually religious man...but...without God, I would not have been able to survive...God didn’t merely help me. I simply could not have made it without God.”<sup>49</sup> The POWs bonded through their religious experiences. According to Col James Kula, there was never someone sitting in the corner by himself

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<sup>44</sup> Gaither, *With God in a POW Camp*, 104-05.

<sup>45</sup> Aronis, “The Religious Experiences of the POWs,” 2.

<sup>46</sup> Fowler.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Oral History Interview of Maj Timothy R. Ayres, Typed transcript, 1991, 56.

<sup>49</sup> Aronis, “The Religious Experiences of the POWs,” 1-2.

who did not participate in the worship services. The important thing, according to Kula, was that they were all together and it was good, common bonding that everyone could focus on and relate to.<sup>50</sup> Of course, religious faith cannot be taught at survival school. Instead, it was something the prisoners instinctively turned to for strength and comfort.

**The Role of Communication.** Perhaps the most glaring omission in preparedness, and the area which proved to be the most critical to the survival of the POWs, was covert communication. During their training, potential POWs were not trained for the eventuality of isolation. The assumption was that prisoners would be housed in large groups, thereby making covert communication unnecessary. Stockman noted that POW compound training at survival schools focused on situations where face-to-face communications and discussions were possible.<sup>51</sup> Yet despite this lack of training, prisoners figured out a way to communicate, and the ability to communicate covertly was absolutely vital. “The lifeline to survival for the POWs was a well developed communication network that included strategically placed notes, wall-tapping, and hand signals.”<sup>52</sup> As Adm James B. Stockdale pointed out, “We could ‘lie low’ and not communicate...or we could communicate as a matter of military duty and ‘take our lumps.’ Myself, and all those near me, were clearly in the second camp. So the problem became how to communicate stealthily.”<sup>53</sup>

The first use of covert communication came out of necessity when a small number of senior officers were isolated from the other prisoners. POW Carlyle S. “Smitty” Harris introduced the “tap code” in 1965, which he had borrowed from the Boy

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<sup>50</sup> Oral History Interview of Col James D. Kula, Typed transcript, 1991, 37.

<sup>51</sup> Stockman, “Authority, Leadership, Organization, and Discipline Among U.S. POWs in the Hanoi Prison System,” 5.

<sup>52</sup> Robert K. Ruhl, “All Day’s Tomorrows,” *Airman*, Nov 1976, 32.

<sup>53</sup> Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale, “Communicating Without Technology,” *Signal*, 6 Nov 1979, 26.

Scouts.<sup>54</sup> The tap code is as follows:

	1	2	3	4	5
1	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>
2	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>J</b>
3	<b>L</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>P</b>
4	<b>Q</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>S</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>U</b>
5	<b>V</b>	<b>W</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Z</b>

Tapping two sets of numbers would indicate the row, then the column, for that letter. For instance, “tap tap—tap tap tap” was “H,” and so on. With no formal training in the tap code it took some time to become proficient. Spike Nasmyth, in his book entitled 2355 Days: A POW’s Story, recounted how he first learned of the tap code after another prisoner had been tapping on his wall for months. When he finally verified there was such a thing as the tap code, Nasmyth asked another prisoner if he had learned the code in survival school since Nasmyth hadn’t heard anything about it. The other POW replied that he had learned it after hearing endless tapping on his wall.<sup>55</sup> Fowler was told about the tap code when another prisoner told him to look behind one of the bricks in his cell (“third brick up from the right”), where he found a slip of paper with the tap code written on it.<sup>56</sup> How did Col John Fer learn the tap code when he was first shot down? He carved it on the flat side of a bar of soap so he could memorize it. Then others began asking “the new guy” for “football and baseball scores. ‘How did SMU do?’ They

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<sup>54</sup> Oral History Interview of Brig Gen Robinson Risner, Typed transcript, 1983, 118.

<sup>55</sup> Spike Nasmyth, *2355 Days: A POW’s Story* (New York, NY: Orion Books, 1991), 50-51.

<sup>56</sup> Fowler.

began asking about current events, but mostly sports questions.”<sup>57</sup> It was a perfect example of prisoners overcoming their environment despite a lack of specific training.

From this basic tap code, the prisoners developed ingenious methods of communicating with each other. Mechenbier recalled how he first learned the tap code and immediately began applying it in a creative way. “A little piece of wire came through the storage room...between his cell and mine, and on the end of it was the tap code. It said, ‘Memorize and then eat this’...we would communicate by doing the tap code by pulling on the wire.”<sup>58</sup> John Paul Cerak recounted how there must have been 25 different ways of communicating, recalling how the senior POWs would just spend years thinking up new methods. Cerak and his group just had flash signs, tap code, and mirrors, but other senior POWs stuck up a broom in a hole in the roof and flashed words by going up and down. Others would put notes inside a hollowed-out stick and drop them in somebody’s courtyard, so one group of prisoners could talk to another group.<sup>59</sup> Flashing a hand over a light, whistling, creative abbreviations to shorten the amount of taps necessary (C.U.L. = see you later; T.K. = think)—all became standard operating procedure out of sheer necessity. “The imagination and ingenuity of the POWs in developing the communications network aided considerably in their being able to utilize the Code [of Conduct] in North Vietnam.”<sup>60</sup>

Even setting policy concerning early release called for creative and innovative communication. One example was when then-Lt Col Hervey Stockman, who was the senior officer in his camp, wanted to let his men know that no one was to depart when

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<sup>57</sup> Oral History Interview of Col John Fer, Typed transcript, 29.

<sup>58</sup> Oral History Interview of Lt Col Edward J. Mechenbier, Typed transcript, 26.

<sup>59</sup> Oral History Interview of John Paul Cerak, Typed transcript, 1991, 21.

<sup>60</sup> Lamar, “The Armed Forces Code of Conduct: An Examination of Its Suitability and Application in the Vietnam War and in Future Conflicts,” 69.

rumors began spreading of a possible early release for three POWs. “I want those guys down there to know that they aren’t going anywhere. Don’t let them go; give them the word,” Stockman commanded. Of course, the guards would not let them make such an announcement overtly, so Mechenbier and two others began walking while carrying the slop to the pigs and sang, “Colonel says, don’t go home. Nobody go home early.”<sup>61</sup> Stockdale mentioned that tappers had their own distinctive style and after a while they could tell who it was by the pattern, intensity, and rhythm of their tapping.<sup>62</sup> Every time a prisoner was made to sweep the floor he would be sending out a regular newspaper’s worth of information. Someone sweeping out their toilet buckets acted as a “town crier.” They even developed a vocal tap code, where ones and twos were coughs and sniffs, the number three was a throat clear, four was a hawk, and five was either an exaggerated sneeze or a spit. And because of all the respiratory problems that the POWs suffered without adequate medical care, the North Vietnamese were none the wiser.<sup>63</sup>

The most fervent efforts by the North Vietnamese to hinder communication could not prevent American ingenuity from prevailing. Brig Gen Robinson Risner recalled a particularly creative example:

“They put blankets over our windows because we were coding out the window with a fan...So the guy across the hall lit his cigarette, flipped it under his door and over under my door. I took it and tied it to a bamboo sliver. Our windows had bars and then heavy screens. The holes in the screen were wide enough so I could get a cigarette through it. I stuck the cigarette through on two slivers of bamboo and burned a hole in the blanket...Then I put a small rag on the end of the bamboo stick, rolled it up, and stuck it through the hole in the blanket. Then I would use it like a tap code, only I would wiggle it up and down for a tap.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Oral History Interview of Lt Col Edward J. Mechenbier, Typed transcript, 41.

<sup>62</sup> Stockdale, “Communicating Without Technology,” 27.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Oral History Interview of Brig Gen Robinson Risner, Typed transcript, 120.

The prisoners began passing hand-written notes by messenger. One of the messengers, Lt Cmdr Bob Shumaker, was a common dishwasher, but the Vietnamese guards hated him because they knew he was communicating but could never catch him in the act. If they had shaken him down, he would have had notes hidden all over him. He would deliver notes as he passed rooms and did more to demoralize the Vietnamese captors and motivate his fellow prisoners than anyone thought possible.<sup>65</sup>

Again, prisoners had not been trained on the tap code or any other method of covert communication prior to being taken prisoner. When asked directly what one thing he would have added to the survival school curriculum, without hesitation Col Fowler cited training on the tap code.<sup>66</sup> Not only was covert communication training not done before the war started, the services were slow to react to the reports of returning POWs who highlighted the need for such training. Risner lamented:

“We were terribly disappointed [when] prisoners...brought the stories back about the covert communications system we used, yet the survival schools weren’t teaching it. New people kept being shot down, and they didn’t know the tap code...It had to come through assimilation through the wall by tapping over and over again...We really were quite disappointed in the people in charge back here, the intelligence department, the Air Force, the Navy, and Army Departments for not integrating this very quickly into the survival school.”<sup>67</sup>

There was no effort to alter or update training procedures given the information becoming available from returning POWs. According to the History of the Air Training Command for Fiscal Year 1973, ATC considered the effects of returning POWs on survival school course material. ATC asked the Air Staff to review the currency of DoD policy. The Air Staff replied that the Code would be closely observed after completion of

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<sup>65</sup> Terrence P. Murray, “The Code of Conduct, An Insider’s View,” (Norfolk, VA: Armed Forces Staff College, 1983), 10.

<sup>66</sup> Fowler.

<sup>67</sup> Oral History Interview of Brig Gen Robinson Risner, Typed transcript, 118.

hostilities in Southeast Asia but that any prior attempts to redefine policies were considered unjustifiable and undesirable.<sup>68</sup>

**The Role of Ingenuity and Imagination.** Despite the lack of specific training, the POWs flourished in their attempts to unify, survive, and return with honor. The ingenuity and imagination of these men exemplified the very qualities we ask of all our officers today. “It has been my observation that in this computer age of specialized technology, there is still no substitute for the power of the human brain in meeting a seemingly insurmountable challenge.”<sup>69</sup> With nothing to occupy their minds for the countless hours, days, weeks, and months either in solitary confinement or in very small groups, the POWs went to great lengths to stay mentally sharp. For many, creativity helped mind overcome matter in fighting off depression and despair. Col Bud Day, a Hanoi POW and Medal of Honor recipient, mentioned that he had to develop a specific program of time management with his thoughts that he could turn on and off like a radio. He would only allow himself to think of his wife and children during mealtime and during prayers.<sup>70</sup> Kula recalled how amazed he was at the mental capacity of his fellow POWs, noting that one prisoner conducted French classes, others would do math courses and discuss various math concepts, and anything else they could think of to pass the time.<sup>71</sup> Mechenbier relayed his specific experiences:

“It was Hanoi University... We had classes in German, French, Russian, Spanish. We had a guy who came in and spoke for an hour a night for a month on the Spanish Inquisition. We had one guy who had memorized the entire Richard III. We had three different levels of math going on in training classes... It was amazing how much you can recall and

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<sup>68</sup> “History of Air Training Command for Fiscal Year 1973,” Air Training Command (U.S. Air Force, 1974), 217-18.

<sup>69</sup> Stockdale, “Communicating Without Technology,” 27.

<sup>70</sup> Ruhl, “All Day’s Tomorrows,” 31.

<sup>71</sup> Oral History Interview of Col James D. Kula, Typed transcript, 38.



then relate and what that contributes to enduring the entire period of time... We taught wine classes, and I have guys to this day who can discriminate between a Chardonnay, a Cabernet, a Claret, know the various Bordeaux regions out of glasses that were exactly, totally empty—never had one to their mouth or to their lips.”<sup>72</sup>

Col John Fer worked on the stock market, built imaginary vacation homes, and figured out complex mathematical problems.<sup>73</sup> Col Hank Fowler learned German, enough to order food in a German restaurant years after his release. He also discussed how his roommate was a young Navy officer who had been an architect major in college, and together they built a home with nothing but their minds.<sup>74</sup>

Necessity strengthened the POWs’ incredible memory capacity. Adm Stockdale spoke of how they disseminated messages throughout the camp:

“I as the senior officer...sent out six 50-word groups. After receiving each group, Nels would have to leave his place under the door where he had seen my finger, go to the wall and tap it out in both directions...It would take a couple of hours or more to get a 300-word message out to everyone composed well enough that they could all memorize it...[Nels] handled about 5,000 words [in a single] day...”<sup>75</sup>

Brig Gen John P. Flynn, 4<sup>th</sup> Allied POW Wing Commander, sent out about 80 messages a week and all of the information had to be put into the memory banks of men since there was no paper and pencils. Each day, roommates would recite the policies to each other in order to keep them fresh in their minds.<sup>76</sup> Interestingly, Flynn was one of the few POWs who had not gone through any survival school, yet his remarkable leadership still prevailed.

The American POWs also found imaginative ways to entertain themselves.

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<sup>72</sup> Oral History Interview of Lt Col Edward J. Mechenbier, Typed transcript, 79.

<sup>73</sup> Oral History Interview of Col John Fer, Typed transcript, 57.

<sup>74</sup> Fowler.

<sup>75</sup> Stockdale, “Communicating Without Technology,” 27.

<sup>76</sup> Brig Gen John P. Flynn, “Captivity in Southeast Asia.” Lecture, Typed transcript, 1974, 11.

Risner recounted how rats would hatch litters in the walls and some prisoners would not kill them. Instead, they watched them play, chasing each other like cats and dogs. They thought they were sort of “cute.”<sup>77</sup> Risner also discussed how the birds provided hours of entertainment. He could hear the birds even when he could not see outside. They would start singing at dawn, and although they had no clocks it enabled them to keep track of day and night.<sup>78</sup> Capt Donald Spoon remembered how prisoners would put on skits and plays, including the Christmas Carol. Spoon played the role of Bob Cratchet’s wife.<sup>79</sup> Capt Jerry Driscoll recalled that there were two or three prisoners with incredible memories of movies they had seen, and at night they would relate the whole story of the movie, getting carried away with telling the plot, sound effects and all. “I remember ‘hearing’ a movie called ‘A Fist Full of Dollars’ that was exciting. And, you know, ‘Gone with the Wind’ was a three- or four-night spectacular,” Driscoll said.<sup>80</sup> Even a sense of humor prevailed on occasion:

“[There was] a game they called ‘Run, Guard, Run.’ One guy would find out when the guard was across camp, then he would scream at the top of his voice, ‘RUN, GUARD, RUN.’ Guards would come running across the camp, and when they got there, some guy on the other side would scream out the words again. The guards could not understand English and had no idea what the prisoners were saying...It sure gave them some great laughs.”<sup>81</sup>

Lt Cmdr (now Senator) John McCain gave an interview shortly after his release in 1973 and disclosed how he sent “coded” messages in letters home to his wife. “I think of you often in your birthday suit. Don’t get it wrinkled.” It was a love letter disguised as a

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<sup>77</sup> Brig Gen Robinson Risner, *The Passing of the Night: My Seven Years as a Prisoner of the North Vietnamese* (Duncanville USA: World Wide Printing, 1999), 180.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>79</sup> Oral History Interview of Capt Donald R. Spoon, Typed transcript, 41.

<sup>80</sup> Paul Molloy, “How Torturers Broke Him,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 3 Apr 1973, 68.

<sup>81</sup> Gaither, *With God in a POW Camp*, 47.

birthday greeting, and getting such messages into his letters and past the guards was one of the few pleasures he got.<sup>82</sup> He also managed to tell his wife how she ought to vote in the 1972 presidential election, telling her to have a “Grand Old Party” in November, making capital letters of G, O, and P.<sup>83</sup>

It was not just mental fitness the POWs were trying to maintain. Despite the horrendous living conditions and lack of nutrition and adequate health care, the POWs were creative in keeping physically fit. Again, the imagination the POWs displayed could not have been taught in any classroom or laboratory setting. Driscoll kept in shape by doing push-ups and lifting weights which he had created by rolling up a large bunch of elephant grass bed mats.<sup>84</sup> Chaplain Aronis recounted tales he had heard from returning POWs during Operation Homecoming. Many prisoners exercised constantly in their rooms, including a staggering amount of push-ups and sit-ups. The “record” was 606 push-ups, and several men were doing over a thousand sit-ups at a time. One man even used the small step in his cell to simulate mountain climbing, maintaining the up and down motion for 16 continuous hours.<sup>85</sup> Another graphic example:

“Air Force Capt Joseph Milligan was suffering from facial and arm burns [from his ejection]... ‘They were draining quite badly, they were full of pus, they smelled rotten. One day I noticed some flies flying around my arms. I allowed them to land and lay eggs on my wounds. When the maggots hatched, they ate the dead flesh. After the dead flesh was gone...I urinated over my arms to wash the maggots off, tore up a T-shirt and rewrapped my arms. And after that, they healed.’”<sup>86</sup>

Of course, one of the prime techniques used by the North Vietnamese jailors was

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<sup>82</sup> *SUN Washington Star News*. “POW Outwitted North Vietnamese Guards in Letters Home,” 1973.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>84</sup> Molloy, “How Torturers Broke Him,” 68.

<sup>85</sup> Aronis, “The Religious Experiences of the POWs,” 4.

<sup>86</sup> *U.S. News and World Report*. “Torture...Solitary...Starvation: POWs Tell the Inside Story.” 9 Apr 1973, 34.

to extract propaganda material from the POWs. The idea was to win favorable public opinion regarding the “humane” treatment afforded the Americans. Again, techniques to resist the Vietnamese efforts illustrated these men’s ingenuity and strength of character. On one occasion Stockdale was selected to meet with a delegation of journalists. He went so far as to cut his own head and beat himself so that he would be of no use as a “positive” example of the North Vietnamese “humane” treatment.<sup>87</sup> Cmdr Dick Stratton used the tap code to blink out the word “torture” with his eyes during an interview, hoping someone watching back home would pick up the clue regarding the Americans’ fate.<sup>88</sup> Some, however, gave the ultimate heroic sacrifice in protecting their country and fellow POWs from propaganda. Risner told their story in his book, The Passing of the Night:

“[One POW selected to meet a delegation] was so emaciated that he looked like one of the Dachau inmates. Though over six feet, he weighed about a hundred pounds. He could hardly maintain his balance. He was followed...by two others who looked the same way...In order to prevent the Vietnamese from using them for propaganda, [one] had starved himself until he was so weak that he could not write and was too emaciated to appear before a delegation...When the final POW tallies were made in 1973, these three...were listed as having ‘died in captivity.’”<sup>89</sup>

**The Role of Organization and Leadership.** One specific area in which the services did a good job preparing prisoners was POW camp organization. The survival school Code of Conduct Preparation Training phase curriculum included a 2-hour block on Organizing for Resistance and Formalized PW Organization, and the Application Training phase included a 1-hour “Organization Seminar” just prior to the camp

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<sup>87</sup> Oral History Interview of Col John Fer, Typed transcript, 39.

<sup>88</sup> Oral History Interview of Lt Col Edward J. Mechenbier, Typed transcript, 4.

<sup>89</sup> Risner, *The Passing of the Night: My Seven Years as a Prisoner of the North Vietnamese*, 185-87.

laboratory.<sup>90</sup> Col Fowler noted that his training in survival school at Stead AFB taught him that one of his first tasks after capture was to find out who was in charge and how the camp was organized.<sup>91</sup> Spoon also said that from day one of his training he had been taught that the senior man in any group always took over.<sup>92</sup>

According to Flynn, the 4<sup>th</sup> Allied POW Wing was the ultimate in organizational sophistication. They had a headquarters group, an alternate headquarters group, and they organized the camp into squadrons.<sup>93</sup> The prisoners within each room were placed into flights under flight commanders. Flynn organized his own headquarters, keeping his O-6s as special staff and designating a Vice Commander.<sup>94</sup> They had a chaplain, a materiel officer, an intelligence officer, and other routine staff positions.<sup>95</sup> Flynn discussed how the wing senior leadership developed resistance conditions, or “RESCONs.” The basic RESCON was just a simple military stance, meaning the prisoners were respectful, polite, and reserved. RESCONs escalated up to the point of riot, which they called “sing,” starting anytime by just singing the Notre Dame victory march.<sup>96</sup> Even the most mundane administrative details were tended to. Each of the senior POWs committed to doing Officer Effectiveness Reports (OERs) for each year the prisoners were in captivity and for each year they changed senior officers. To document the prisoners’ duty performance during what they called the “Battle of Hanoi,” they wrote over 1,800 OERs in the Air Force alone and submitted over 2,400 awards and

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<sup>90</sup> “Syllabus of Instruction for Survival Training,” 27-32.

<sup>91</sup> Fowler.

<sup>92</sup> Oral History Interview of Capt Donald R. Spoon, Typed transcript, 9.

<sup>93</sup> Flynn, “Captivity in Southeast Asia.” Lecture, Typed transcript, 9.

<sup>94</sup> Stockman, “Authority, Leadership, Organization, and Discipline Among U.S. POWs in the Hanoi Prison System,” 62-63.

<sup>95</sup> Oral History Interview of Capt Donald R. Spoon, Typed transcript, 61.

<sup>96</sup> Flynn, “Captivity in Southeast Asia.” Lecture, Typed transcript, 17.

decorations.<sup>97</sup> How did organization contribute to the POWs' survival? By providing unity of effort they were able to fortify each other and remain consistent, making it more difficult for the jailors to exploit any one prisoner for information.

“Separate men and they are weakened. Self-pride loses much of its motivating force when peer pressure is absent. Every man has his breaking point. With the application of sufficient pressure, psychological as well as physical pain, a man can be made submissive temporarily, if not continuously. His resistance to these pressures is immeasurably increased by contact with others.”<sup>98</sup>

What about leadership? How does one prepare to lead in such a hellish environment? Prior to Flynn's arrival, Risner had assumed command. Stockman pointed out that Risner's arrival was, in a way, a “fortunate combination of circumstances, a new camp still disorganized, a relatively unhampered though clandestine communications system, and the presence of a strong, well qualified, experienced leader...”<sup>99</sup> According to Flynn, leadership under prison circumstances was quite different than leadership in a combat wing or other high-pressure leadership assignment.<sup>100</sup> So what kind of leadership is most effective in the prison situation? According to Stockman, the great majority of POWs agreed that an authoritarian style of leadership worked best in the prison environment.<sup>101</sup> Those who were senior took charge, gave orders, and expected those orders to be followed. They also showed great leadership by example. “The only really meaningful leadership is leadership by example...and the seniors...put up a resistance struggle that was epic in its proportions.”<sup>102</sup> In Driscoll's opinion, the need for the senior

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>98</sup> Stockman, “Authority, Leadership, Organization, and Discipline Among U.S. POWs in the Hanoi Prison System,” 62-63.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>100</sup> Flynn, “Captivity in Southeast Asia.” Lecture, Typed transcript, 2-3.

<sup>101</sup> Stockman, “Authority, Leadership, Organization, and Discipline Among U.S. POWs in the Hanoi Prison System,” 64.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 57.

man to take charge and the need for everyone to obey him to keep the POW infrastructure alive and communicating was critical. The POWs were able to impose military order and discipline despite a totally repressive environment. According to Driscoll, it was forceful leadership, applied through the structure of the Code of Conduct, that made the difference.<sup>103</sup>

**Post Vietnam Review.** In the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War, what lessons were learned and what changes were put into practice? Indeed, most returning POWs felt the Code of Conduct was an extremely helpful guide and should not be changed. Col Bud Day said that it was the consensus of a majority of the senior POWs that the Code of Conduct is “a really beautiful document, one about as restrictive and at the same time liberal as a document of that kind can be...it is an extremely workable, viable, and valuable document.”<sup>104</sup> The Defense Advisory Committee for the Code of Conduct was formed and first met in May 1976 to review and make any suggested changes to the Code of Conduct. The goal was to take input from returning prisoners and help the services better prepare their men for future POW situations. The results:

“In Article V...one word was changed and one was deleted...future POWs would be **required** to give the same information to comply with the Geneva Convention but the deletion of the word **only** would allow captives a flexibility of response and action...” (emphasis added)<sup>105</sup>

Some other minor tweaks have been made to the Code of Conduct, but it essentially remains to this day as it did following the 1976 revisions.

The real issue with regard to the Code of Conduct after the Vietnam War had to do with the level of training afforded potential POWs. Did the POWs in Vietnam really

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<sup>103</sup> Murray, “The Code of Conduct, An Insider’s View,” 10-11.

<sup>104</sup> Ruhl, “All Day’s Tomorrows,” 32.

<sup>105</sup> Ruhl, “The Code of Conduct,” 64.

know what to expect? Some were quite impressed with the realism of the Stead and Fairchild schools. “One time I almost laughed out loud because...their interrogation room was set up just about like we found at Fairchild.”<sup>106</sup> Spoon felt he had gained some strength and knowledge from his training at Stead AFB, noting that it was not until he went into his first Hanoi torture session that he noticed any difference in the camp situation from the one in which he had trained.<sup>107</sup>

Not everyone, however, felt the same way. Spike Nasmyth recalled how he was “prepared” by the Air Force Survival School to expect a “good guy-bad guy” routine from the interrogators to extract information. Sure enough, the “bad guy” came in and worked him over, but that was where the similarities to Fairchild ceased. “I don’t know where that survival school instructor got his info, but the ‘good guy’ never showed up. Waiting for him was the main thing that kept me going, and damn near got me killed.”<sup>108</sup> Fer felt that prisoners had an expectation on what was coming, including isolation, interrogation, threats, and physical abuse, but that only gave prisoners a basic knowledge of what to expect, not a realistic application of what could be done to combat such tactics.<sup>109</sup>

Claude Watkins, a renowned expert on survival training techniques and a POW during WWII, felt the ultimate goal should be a school for high-risk personnel with the best qualified instructors from all the services, using the best training aids and materials, and employing the most realistic training.<sup>110</sup> In his 1975 research, Lt Col John M. Luke made several recommendations for better POW training. He advocated better guidance

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<sup>106</sup> Oral History Interview of John Paul Cerak, Typed transcript, 4.

<sup>107</sup> Oral History Interview of Capt Donald R. Spoon, Typed transcript, 1.

<sup>108</sup> Nasmyth, *2355 Days: A POW's Story*, 27-28.

<sup>109</sup> Oral History Interview of Col John Fer, Typed transcript, 14-15.

<sup>110</sup> Ruhl, “The Code of Conduct,” 66.



for servicemen (especially non-pilots) on how to resist interrogators; what to expect from captors; how servicemen alone must prepare their families for the possibility of them becoming POWs; more psychological training; consistent training among the services; greater information on enemy ideology; how food affects the body; and how to combat propaganda.<sup>111</sup> These were all areas in which many POWs felt ill prepared for what they encountered in Vietnam.

Many also acknowledged that training was inadequate on the Code of Conduct itself and how it should have been interpreted and used. Petelin recommended sweeping changes in Code training to include more philosophy of use in order to provide better guidelines on how far a prisoner should resist coercion for propaganda effect. He also recommended joint survival training to provide a common starting point among fellow POWs from all the different services.<sup>112</sup> Cmdr Ken Coskey, who was shot down in 1968, said his survival training in Maine left him unprepared to interpret the Code of Conduct in the conditions he encountered in North Vietnam. He said his training gave him a taste of what was to come, but that each man had his own idea of what the Code was.<sup>113</sup> When it came right down to it, the POWs had to figure out what to do on their own and with the help of their fellow POWs, not on some training they had received before being captured.

“Our servicemen found that no matter how strong or how well briefed they were, they couldn’t prepare for hours and years of solitary confinement... While it is difficult to prepare through effective training for coping with a specific POW environment, it is impossible to prepare for the anxiety of capture and its aftermath.”<sup>114</sup>

Rather than specific training on what to do under prison circumstances, several

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<sup>111</sup> Lt Col John M. Luke, “North Vietnamese Propaganda Efforts Employing U.S. Prisoners of War,” (Ft. Belvoir VA: Department of the Air Force, Headquarters Air Force Intelligence Services, 1975), 97-99.

<sup>112</sup> Petelin, “Article V of the Code of Conduct and the Vietnam Experience,” 61-62.

<sup>113</sup> Murray, “The Code of Conduct, An Insider’s View,” 4-5.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 5.

former POWs felt the type of people they were was more important than the training they had received. Mechenbier noted that prisoners were able to withstand more than they ever thought they could because of their character and because they were simply a product of American society.<sup>115</sup> Maj Timothy Ayres agreed, that despite his training, “...you don’t know until you are tested what you’re going to do...I mean, I never knew I would react certain ways until I was put in that position.”<sup>116</sup> Fer said it came down to an intangible part, asking himself the philosophical question, “How ought I to act,” which transcended any slogan or code.<sup>117</sup> It was not the training. It was the character of the men.

**Conclusion.** Whether leaders are born or made is an age-old question. The examples shown during the Vietnam War by our heroic POWs indicate that leadership depends much more on the type of person a leader is rather than the specific training that leader receives. Rochester and Kiley concluded in their book, Honor Bound: American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973, that the POWs’ impressive professional and educational credentials were of limited benefit in such a harsh captivity situation, owing more to their qualities of resiliency and durability.<sup>118</sup> Rather than formal training, it was the intangible traits that made these men great aviators—aggressiveness, creativity, intellect, and loyalty—that also allowed them to flourish and survive under extraordinary circumstances. As in any leadership setting, communication and organization played vital roles in the POWs’ success. Characteristics such as unity of effort, discipline, high standards, peer pressure and accountability, ingenuity, imagination, the ability to adapt,

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<sup>115</sup> Oral History Interview of Lt Col Edward J. Mechenbier, Typed transcript, 77.

<sup>116</sup> Oral History Interview of Maj Timothy R. Ayres, Typed transcript, 68.

<sup>117</sup> Oral History Interview of Col John Fer, Typed transcript, 60-63.

<sup>118</sup> Stuart I. Rochester and Frederick Kiley. *Honor Bound: American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973*. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1999), 443.

and esprit de corps are the very traits that any military organization must work to achieve. Even if we do not face the heart-wrenching existence of prison life we can take these lessons directly from the POWs in Vietnam and apply them in our units today.

Some of the stories of these heroic men lead to smiles; some lead to tears; all lead to admiration. Most of us will probably never face challenges similar to what these men did; even so, we like to think we know what we would do if placed in the same situation. Until we find ourselves there, however, we do not really know how we would cope, even given the best training available. That said, the services owe it to the men and women in uniform to give them the best possible training in order to build moral courage, character, and confidence.

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